

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE · OFFICE OF INFORMATION, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20250

PLANTING THOUGHTS

POLLUTION AND TREES

Some Can Take It, Some Can't. When the murky air clears and your eyes stop smarting, look at the trees. There is a good chance they are turning brown, losing leaves or needles, and otherwise succumbing. It's no mystery about the cause for your smarting eyes and dying trees--the culprit is air pollution. Scientists have not yet been able to amass a complete report on the effects of air pollution on trees. They do know, however, sources of major tree despoilers such as sulfur dioxide, fluorides, and ozone which result from a combination of industrial and natural causes, and that individual trees respond differently to the numerous pollutants. A plant pathologist of USDA's Forest Service has compiled in a little booklet a list of known responses of both hardwoods and softwoods to various pollutants. Various species of trees are rated as tolerant, intermediate, or sensitive to about 12 pollutants--where the response is known. For instance, eastern white pine is sensitive to sulfur dioxide, hydrogen fluoride, ozone, oxides of nitrogen, chlorine, and mercury vapor, but is tolerant of hydrogen chloride and peroxyacetyl nitrate. Home and professional gardeners, landscapers, arborists or anyone planning to plant a tree will find the booklet of help in making a selection likely to survive pollution in their areas. Free copies of the booklet, "Our Air: Unfit for Trees," are available from: Information Services, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, Upper Darby, Pennsylvania 19082.



RICE IS EVEN NICER

The Shape Of Things To Come. Rice has a new look. Instead of the usual oval shape, rice may soon be found in stores as squares, circles, triangles, or even stars. The reason is Rice Shapes, a new frozen rice product created by scientists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service. Besides the variety of shapes, the new product can take on a variety of tastes by the addition of spices, bellpeppers, onions, tomato paste, ground potato or bean flakes. Tasty enough to be eaten as a snack, Rice Shapes can also be served as the carbohydrate portion of a balanced meal or as a partial meat substitute: Soy flour or other protein supplements can be added to increase the product's protein content. For the housewife, preparing this happy combination of interesting shapes, flavors, and nutrition is simple. Frozen Rice Shapes can be baked in the oven much like french fries, deep fried, or even skewered for a rice ka-bob.

STREAM CLEANING

With Cotton. The old housekeeping standby, the cotton rag, is showing promise of being just as useful in the war on pollution--as a stream cleaner. Scientists of USDA's Agricultural Research Service, looking for new durable press finishes for cotton, may have opened the way to removing mercury from water. During their research, the chemists discovered that several compounds they are testing have a high affinity for metal salts and can make cotton a highly efficient "trap" for water-borne heavy metals. The trap, which can be regenerated for repeated use, is capable of reducing the mercury content of contaminated water below the 5 parts per billion now permitted in drinking water. The treatments, which are simple and can be accomplished on standard textile finishing equipment used for durable press cottons, offer intriguing stream-cleaning possibilities. For example, a continuous belt of fabric could be passed into a mercury-polluted stream to absorb the mercury, squeezed through rolls to remove excess water, immersed in a regenerating bath and then returned to the stream to continue its mercury scavenging.

WHAT HOMEMAKERS KNOW AND DO

About Food And Nutrition. Preliminary findings of a nationwide USDA survey reveals some interesting facts about what homemakers know and what they do about food and nutrition. Conclusions of this early report indicate that homemakers know more facts about food and nutrition than they apply; that even when the homemaker is not satisfied all family members are eating a desirable diet, she does little or nothing about it; and that food selection is a highly individual matter--the fact that a full assortment of food is available in the home is no assurance family members will choose to eat it. The survey, conducted under the direction of USDA's Agricultural Research Service, was initiated to find answers to what the U.S. homemaker knows about nutritive values of foods, what her ideas are on handling foods to preserve nutritive value, appearance and flavor, what eating habits or patterns need to be changed to improve the nutritional health of the Nation. To bring about such changes, it is first necessary to know why homemakers choose the foods they do. A full report on the survey will be published by the Department at a later date with further analysis of the data.

UPS AND DOWNS

And Some Reasons Why. Fresh vegetable prices have a way of posting dramatic ups and downs at the grocery store while processed items are likely to stay more constant. Consider the potato. As chronicled in The Vegetable Situation, a publication of USDA's Economic Research Service, farmers grew more potatoes than the market wanted in 1970 and 1971. So, farm prices went down. So did retail prices--but not as much--since shipping and marketing costs tend to remain constant. With farm prices down, farmers produced 8 percent fewer potatoes in 1972. Such small changes in production often bring larger changes in prices. By December 1972 farm prices of potatoes were more than a third higher than the year before and retail prices were up a fifth--to \$1.00 for a 10-pound sack of No. 1's. The Vegetable Situation forecasts that retail prices will average over \$1.00 during the first half of 1973 and seasonally low summer supplies of potatoes are likely to keep prices up the second half. Higher prices are an inducement to grow more. Forecasters look for a bigger fall potato crop in 1973, likely signalling lower prices after harvest. Thus another up-and-down cycle is completed. Meanwhile, what happened to processed potatoes? The price of frozen french fries has hardly budged, moving from 16 to 17 cents for a 9-ounce package, nationwide, during the last three years. Price gains for instant mashed potatoes have been minor, too. Processors can maintain more level pricing because they buy extra-large quantities when prices are best and can store the finished product for a long time.

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The Vegetable Situation is one of a series of USDA reports--issued several times a year--designed to analyze the current situation, forecast what's ahead for major food and farm commodities, and help to explain the reasons behind retail food price developments. Economists, home economists, teachers, writers, the press, food marketing specialists, and others should find these reports valuable as an informative source and reference. For a free sample copy of The Vegetable Situation, write to Information Division, Office of Management Services, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

A BIRD IN A CAGE

Can't Choose His Environment. Owners of caged birds should keep an eye out for some hazards that wintertime can bring to their pets, according to Extension Service veterinarians. Keeping the bird out of drafts, of course, is a primary precaution against pneumonia and respiratory complications. Another problem is low humidity or "close" atmosphere that sometimes results in homes with central heating. Lack of moisture in the air can soon make the bird as dry as its dried-out feathers. Canaries and parakeets do well at temperatures from 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit, so keep the bird in a cool part of a house if you prefer warmer temperatures or cover the cage at night if you turn the thermostat down at night. If your bird is allowed free flight around the house, you usually don't worry about open windows during the winter. However, a fire in an open fireplace is a real danger. Be sure a guard is over the fireplace before releasing the bird.

WHAT'S IN A DATE?

Fewer Shopper Complaints, For One Thing. Stores which open date food may have fewer consumer complaints, according to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. A joint study by USDA's Economic Research Service and the Consumer Research Institute found that pack dates (when the item was packed or processed) and pull dates (the last day on which the item should be sold) reduced by about 50 percent the incidence of shopper complaints about freshness of food. Eighteen percent of the shoppers interviewed in a national telephone survey complained about food going stale sooner than expected. To find out if open dates could affect shoppers' satisfaction with foods, pull or pack dates were tried on about 600 perishable and semi-perishable items in selected food chain stores. Items chosen for open dates were those that had received "not satisfactory" ratings from the telephone interviews. After eight weeks of open dating, fewer complaints were reported--even on some items which were not date labeled. Single free copies of the report, "Food Dating: Shoppers' Reaction and Impact on Retail Foodstores" (MRR-984) are available from the Office of Communication, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

COMO COMPRAR

It's Poultry This Time. Chickens, turkeys, and other poultry are subjects of the newest addition to USDA's Spanish-language "how to buy food" series. "Como Comprar Las Aves de Corral" (How To Buy Poultry), explains how knowing USDA grades for poultry and the class (age) of the birds can help consumers make better choices at the supermarket. The pamphlet, prepared by USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, also gives tips on storing and cooking poultry. Single free copies of "Como Comprar Las Aves de Corral" (G-157-S) may be requested from the Office of Communication, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

FEBRUARY PLENTIFUL FOODS

Protein-Rich Foods Are Featured. Dollar-conscious food shoppers should find February Plentiful Foods, broiler-fryers, peanuts, and peanut products, abundant and relatively good buys. In March, peanuts and peanut products along with turkeys and dry beans will be on the Plentiful List.

WHITHER THOU GOEST?

Moving Along. To haul the tons of products from farm to consumer, the U.S. has over 200,000 miles of railroads, 3.3 million miles of intercity highways, and 26,000 miles of improved waterways.

SERVICE is a monthly newsletter of consumer interest. It is designed for those who report to the individual consumer rather than for mass distribution. For information about items in this issue, write: Lillie Vincent, Editor of Service, Office of Information, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250. Telephone (202) 447-5437.